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CORRESPONDENCE

May 18, 1920.

TO THE COLUMBIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY :

A few days ago I received a letter containing an inquiry respecting the removal of the body of some distinguished American from its original burial place to another, which I enclosed to Dr. William Tindall, of this Society, with a request for any information or suggestion that he could offer on the subject.

Dr. Tindall sent the letter to Mr. Harrison H. Dodge, the Superintendent of the Mount Vernon estate, whose courteous and informing reply and the letter to which it is a response, are herewith submitted, with the suggestion that they be made part of the published proceedings of this Society.

MAUD BURR MORRIS,
Secretary, Columbia Historical Society.

RANNEY GRAIN & COAL COMPANY

C. O. Ranney, Mgr.
Sioux Rapids, Iowa

April 29, 1920.

HISTORICAL SOCIETY,
Washington, D. C.

Gentlemen: Could you furnish us with any information concerning the following event: Some months ago some of us read newspaper article telling of leaden casket of some great man which had been opened and examined. We remember that the alcohol was low and that a portion of face we think it was a cheek bone was decayed. We all have different

opinions as to who the man was, but the one that seems to prevail is that it was Washington. A large number including teachers are interested and we would be pleased to learn any particulars that you could give us.

Any expense incurred in finding the item, we will be glad to pay. Send the bill to me.

Respectfully yours,

C. O. RANNEY.

Dear Harry Dodge:

Do you recall any incident at Mount Vernon, which bore any relation to the foregoing newspaper account, or any exhumation that would correspond with it?

Sincerely,

WILLIAM TINDALL,
Room 509 District Building,
Washington, D. C.

May 7, 1920.

MOUNT VERNON, VIRGINIA

May 8, 1920.

DR. WILLIAM TINDALL,

My dear Dr. Tindall,

Possibly I may be able to throw a bit of light on the subject mentioned in the communication bearing your postscript.

Some *years* ago, I remember, one of the Washington newspapers published an account of what happened at Mount Vernon, in 1837, when the remains of General Washington and his wife were transferred from the "inner vault" of the Tomb and placed within the marble sarcophagi which had been provided, and which have ever since been in plain sight of visitors standing before the Tomb entrance.

On that occasion quite a large party of Senators, Members of Congress, and others, came to witness the transfer to "the last resting place."

Among them was a little boy (name forgotten by me) whose father raised him on his shoulder that he might see, over the heads of the crowd in front, what there was of the ceremony. The published account (after this child had grown to old age and died) was, in effect, that the lid of the leaden casket (the General's) was opened for a few moments before being placed in the sarcophagus, and (so it appeared to the child) Washington's body was seen floating in alcohol and his cheek just touching the glass.

That was the impression made upon the mind of the child (who was some distance back from the scene of action) but it was evidently retained throughout his life.

I cannot accept that published account as correct because of many traditions handed down to me by descendants of other eyewitnesses.

The most reliable authority, I have had many occasions to quote, was an old man (William Burgess, a stonemason of Alexandria) whom I employed at Mt. Vernon from 1885 until he died, 1893.

Burgess was an apprentice bricklayer and helped build the "New Tomb," and was present when the remains of General Washington, and others, were moved (April 19, 1831*) from the "Old Tomb" to the new. Only a few members of the Washington family were present then and this eighteen-year-old lad (Burgess) was with them when they determined to open the leaden casket to assure themselves of the identity of what it enclosed. They all expressed astonishment, when the face of the General was revealed, to observe how little his facial expression (judging from portraits) had changed,

* Washington's body was moved twice, that is, on April 19, 1831, from the old to the new tomb, on which occasion old—then young—Burgess was present as described; and in 1837, when the transferral from the "inner vault" to the marble sarcophagus (since in view from the tomb front) was accomplished.—H. H. D.

in the thirty odd years since death. But the sealed leaden casket had been the reason of preservation of form.

Burgess's oft repeated testimony was to the effect that after the face had been exposed for a few minutes there was an appreciable change noticed by all, a falling in of the features quickly occurred. If there had been alcohol used this wouldn't have occurred. No alcohol was subsequently put in the casket, I know!

You can rely upon Burgess's account to be correct.

Yours,

HARRISON H. DODGE,
Supt.